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Early Modern Postmodern Polities: The Narratives of Colonial Political Development. A Review of: The Varieties of Political Experience in Eighteenth-Century America

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Richard R. Beeman. *The Varieties of Political Experience in Eighteenth-Century America*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004. 376 pp. Notes and index. $39.95.

Richard R. Beeman's *The Varieties of Political Experience in Eighteenth-Century America* is an ambitious effort to re-think the development of democratic political practices during the eighteenth century. Beeman orients his narrative around the trope of pluralism. Pluralism, for Beeman, works on two levels. First, he argues that one cannot tell a common story of colonial political practices during the eighteenth century. In fact, he writes, "diversity may be the *only* generalization that we can make about eighteenth-century American political culture" (pp. 1–2). Second, Beeman argues that ethnic, religious, economic, and political diversity was vital to moving American politics in a democratic direction, first in the western backcountry and the cities and then—during and after the American Revolution—throughout the new nation.

The colonial period of American history has long suffered under the shadow of the American Revolution. What is American about the period of North American history before the United States was formed? What role should the United States's pre-national past play in its national history? For Americans during the nineteenth century, the colonial past was vital to national identity. They believed that colonists had crossed the Atlantic and planted the seeds of freedom that blossomed into democracy after the American Revolution. Similar themes were developed by Alexis de Tocqueville in *Democracy in America* (1835) and Louis Hartz in *The Liberal Tradition in America* (1955). Tocqueville and Hartz both argued that America was born free, that it was a liberal society from the first settlements. The spirited anti-establishmentarianism of the Puritans combined with easy access to land made America a more egalitarian and a more democratic society than its European parents. As Tocqueville put it, the colonies "seemed destined to encourage the growth of liberty."

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Perhaps nothing contradicts the claim that colonial society was egalitarian more than black slavery and the settlers' cruelty to Native Americans. But these contradictions do not undermine Tocqueville's (who was sensitive to the condition of blacks and Indians) and Hartz's arguments. After all, Tocqueville and Hartz were concerned with the white settlers inside English polities. Starting in the 1960s and 1970s, however, social and cultural historians argued that even among white settlers colonial North America was not particularly egalitarian and certainly not democratic. These scholars emphasized the early modern condition of colonial America. Like England and Europe, colonial Americans lived in a traditional, organic, hierarchical society.[1] Many scholars celebrated this past for its communitarian and noncapitalist character, using the differences between colonial America and today's America as a source of inspiration and critique. The world we have lost, we learned, was anything but liberal.

In the 1970s, a new conception of colonial politics emerged that emphasized the centrality of "republican" or Whig ideas to colonial politics. Republicanism strengthened the link between early modern Europe and colonial America. For example, J. G. A. Pocock's *The Machiavellian Moment* (1975) follows the progression of republican ideas from fifteenth-century Florence to the American Revolution, and John M. Murrin, in his influential essay "The Great Inversion," argues that the American Revolution and its aftermath can best be understood within the context of English events and ideas.[2] It was the Glorious Revolution that set the paradigm for the American Revolution, not any unique colonial egalitarianism. Colonial Americans took hold of a strand of European thought that entered English politics during the upheavals of the seventeenth century. Republicanism was both a political and an ethical system. At its root, republicans argued that all political authority is derived from the people, challenging the argument that their god had ordained the King as his vice-regent. But republicanism, housed in a classical idiom, also had a normative dimension. Republicans believed that the purpose of government was to serve the public good, and thus the best leaders would set aside selfish interests and think broadly about the needs of the people. Those best equipped to be rulers, it turned out, were not the people themselves, but the better sort, those with enough land and education to be independent of any pecuniary interest. Republicanism may not have been egalitarian but it was opposed to arbitrary government. It thus provided a language for colonial assemblies to defend their prerogative against the royal governor and, later, Parliament.

The image we now have of colonial America is strikingly different from that which we have of the early national era. And, of course, the turning point is the American Revolution. If British North America was largely traditional and if its political language was derived from continental and English

sources, it was not uniquely American. No person has made this argument more explicitly than Gordon S. Wood in *Radicalism of the American Revolution* (1991). To Wood, colonial America was a largely traditional hierarchical society. Republican ideas help explain why and how Americans went into the Revolution. But, just as American elites set about to create a republic, it was undermined from below as ordinary people embraced egalitarianism and created a liberal democracy instead. Even though about half of Wood's book is dedicated to the colonial period, his colonial America is worlds apart from the get-up-and-go democratic and capitalist society that followed it.

Recently, three syntheses, of which Beeman's *The Varieties of Political Experience in Eighteenth-Century America* is the latest, have attempted to overcome this divide between the colonial and "American" periods. Perhaps no recent work has attacked the Europeanization of colonial history more adamantly than Jon Butler's *Becoming America: The Revolution before 1776* (2000). As the title suggests, Butler argues that colonial Americans' unique experiences transformed them from Europeans into Americans before the Revolution. What distinguished eighteenth-century America was its relative modernity, Butler argues, a modernity that embraced tolerance for religious and cultural pluralism, a market economy, and relatively egalitarian political institutions and practices. Colonial North America, Butler concludes, was "a society not at all like Europe." Pluralism is also one of the central themes of Alan Taylor's *American Colonies* (2001). Like Butler, Taylor argues that the core American experience is diversity. Taylor abandons the traditional focus on the development of the thirteen mainland British colonies in order to examine the entire region that has become the modern United States. He discusses not only the varieties of European colonialism, but also the diversity of racial, religious, and political groups that inhabited North America, including Native Americans. Taylor denies that the colonial era is an irrelevant preamble to the American one. Instead, even after 1776, the colonial period of American history continued as the newly-created United States became an imperial power of its own, conquering both European and Native American regions as it expanded westward. The experience of colonialism in a diverse society, then, becomes the central narrative of American history, and the Revolution, while important, does not change this story.

Beeman's interest is in the development of American democratic politics, but he argues against the imperial narrative which dates back to Charles McLean Andrews's *The Colonial Background of the American Revolution* (1924) and includes Jack P. Greene's *Peripheries and Center* (1986). The imperial and republican interpretations reinforce each other in works such as Bernard Bailyn's *The Origins of American Politics* (1967) and Richard Bushman's *King and People in Provincial Massachusetts* (1985). These scholars argue that colonial politics must be placed within an imperial context. The colonists inhabited

provincial societies in an Atlantic world. The key to understanding American politics in the eighteenth century is remembering that the colonies were English. The central narrative of colonial political development concerns the rise of the assemblies, which grew in power and self-confidence until, by 1763, they considered themselves co-equal to Parliament. Just as the King ruled with Parliament in England, so the King must rule with the assemblies in British North America and the Caribbean. The imperial crisis developed over disagreements concerning the status of the colonial assemblies. Parliament, refusing to consider the assemblies as its equals, asserted its right to oversee colonial affairs. The King, who since Charles II had been trying to gain more control over the colonies, was no help. The assemblies had long frustrated royal authority, making the King unlikely to threaten his relations with Parliament in order to defend them. One can see the disconnect between the two sides of the Atlantic in Thomas Jefferson's "A Summary View of the Rights of British North America" (1774). Jefferson, writing to the delegates assembling in Congress, urged them to appeal for the King's aid in protecting them from Parliament. Jefferson may have been serious, but his perspective was not taken seriously on the other side of the ocean.

Beeman questions this story. He argues that we must look not only at institutions and ideas but also at political practices. He believes that neither the imperial nor the republican interpretations take account of the realities of colonial politics. *The Varieties of Political Experience* is structured around chapters describing the political cultures that prevailed in each of the colonies as well as in distinct regions such as the Carolina backcountry, the Maine frontier, and cities. Each chapter begins with vignettes of political figures that best embodied the colony's or region's politics. Beeman uses these figures to test how closely each colony or region approximated the republican ideal. For example, in Virginia, where republicanism exerted a strong influence over political practice, George Washington acts as the exemplary figure. Although lacking a formal education, Washington had the wealth and the virtue to be a republican leader and he conscientiously sought to serve the common good. In the Carolina backcountry, in contrast, lesser-known politicians on the make are described as as "feckless, venal, and larcenous a lot as existed anywhere in America" (pp. 167–8).

In addition to looking at individual figures, Beeman pulls from the vast secondary literature to examine how colonial politics functioned in each colony and region. Beeman does an excellent job synthesizing decades of research on different colonies. He sets forth several criteria to test how much colonial political practice diverged from the republican ideal. These criteria include how well citizens were represented in the legislatures; how often legislators attended legislative sessions; who voted in elections; how often citizens made use of the petition to address their leaders; and whether leaders

used their power to serve the people. When necessary, as in the Regulator movement, Beeman also examines the political activity of the people out of doors. Beeman concludes that there was no colony in which the republican ideal of disinterested leadership on behalf of the common good was completely implemented. In settled and stable colonies such as Massachusetts and Virginia, leaders were more likely to come from the better sort and to act with the public interest in mind. In other regions, such as New York's Hudson River Valley or coastal South Carolina, elites tended to be more concerned with protecting their own interests than serving the people. Moreover, colonies diverged greatly in how they apportioned representation and how well legislatures served the public interest. Beeman provides strong evidence that republicanism alone is an insufficient lens to understand colonial politics.

Beeman's intent is "to test, not endorse, the power and efficacy of republican rhetoric" (pp. 3–4). He proves that no leader could meet fully the demanding expectations of republican ideology, although many tried to act as if they did. By subjecting ideas to the reality test, Beeman focuses on the contexts in which political language is used. Since each of the colonies had a distinct political culture and history, historians cannot take at face value legislators' claims to speak for the people. Beeman is correct that the imperial and republican interpretations rest on an implicit assumption that legislators in the assemblies were defending "the people" from imperial power. As often as not, however, legislators invoked the people to serve particular interests. By taking popular language too literally, Beeman believes, political historians have allowed rhetoric to overcome the complex reality of colonial politics. Yet most historians of the republican school work in the history of ideas; their point is not that American society was literally republican, but rather that the language of republicanism helps us explain the meaning of political conflicts during the colonial and early national eras. Beeman provides a corrective to earlier interpretations; by downplaying ideas, however, he cannot explain what motivated so many colonists to support independence in 1776. It was precisely the disjunction between their political expectations and imperial reality that spurred Americans to rebel against England.

Beeman locates the roots of modern America in the backcountry and the cities. Discussing the southern backcountry's transition from frontier instability to relative stability, Beeman writes that the backcountry was "in the process of becoming more like the societies that spawned them but at the same time moving toward a new, 'American' definition of social and political order." This America was one with rapid population increase, geographic and economic mobility, religious and ethnic diversity, and an economic base founded on local agriculture. One result of these traits, Beeman suggests, is that the backcountry had a narrower gap between rich and poor than in the older regions and less secure local political institutions. But most important of

all, in these mobile and diverse regions, social life was dominated by "the quest for personal independence" (pp. 157–8). Backcountry regions were the first to overthrow the republican ideal of an organic hierarchical society and replace it with a more egalitarian and individualistic culture. While this meant less secure and effective governance, it also meant more freedom for individuals.

In the cities, similarly, out of ethnic and religious pluralism, a variegated economic structure, and the need of elites to mobilize middling sections of the population emerged "a modern American conception of politics." In urban areas, Beeman writes, "the notion of society as an organic whole began to be seen more clearly as the fiction that it was" (pp. 247–50). Conflicts between different economic interests gave the lie to any effort to talk about unity. Urban elites were the most likely to find their interests affected by imperial policies. To protest imperial policies, they turned to popular language, claiming to defend the people's rights against the King or Parliament. To give legitimacy to this claim, they organized public meetings of ordinary citizens. One unwitting result was the "awakening and mobilization of 'opinion'" (p. 251). Ordinary urban citizens gained a sense of their own importance and rights as members of the public. Beeman relies on vignettes of urban protests to the Stamp Act to make his case. In Boston, New York, and Philadelphia, elite efforts to mobilize citizens against imperial policies gave rise to the expression of competing interests from the people themselves. In Philadelphia, in particular, Beeman argues that the flow of power from the colonial elite to extra-constitutional assemblies, which culminated in the radically democratic constitution of 1776, was the product of urban diversity and empowerment. Beeman demonstrates that ordinary citizens helped foster a democratic revolution at home.

Beeman hopes to overcome the gap between colonial and national history by emphasizing the pre-Revolutionary origins of American democracy, but he takes a more moderate position than earlier historians. He argues that colonial political ideas were largely English, but their practices, especially in the backcountry and the cities, were uniquely modern. Beeman considers the democratization of American politics an ongoing process that "began well before the American Revolution commenced . . . and continues today" (p. 292). No doubt, colonial America was not a carbon copy of England. Whether inspired by ideologies such as Puritanism or by the challenges of conquering a continent and establishing stable societies, the colonists modified inherited political traditions. To Beeman, the Revolution, while a turning point, did not mark a fundamental break from the past. Instead, the Revolution's outcome depended on each colony's distinct history. In Pennsylvania, egalitarian ideas, the expansion of the vote, and the acceptance of pluralistic interest group politics marked the transition to a democratic

society. In other states, the Revolution took decades to play out. In South Carolina, for example, the Revolution "in some important senses . . . never happened" in 1776 because of that state's elite-dominated political culture (p. 287). Only Pennsylvanians, Beeman believes, connected their modern political practices to a new political ideology. This is true only if we know the endpoint ahead of time. One of the strengths of the republican and imperial schools is that they emphasize both the continuity of political thought between the colonial and early national eras while also stressing the Revolution's importance in transforming inherited ideas to meet new needs and to solve new problems. Beeman makes clear that political activity often looks very different from political ideology, but he does not tell us how they might be connected. His work hopefully will inspire more research on how colonial political practices affected political ideas and vice versa.

Another theme that might bridge the gap between colonial and national history is pluralism, as Beeman, Butler, and Taylor all suggest. The American experience is defined by an ongoing effort to live in a pluralistic society. And it was in the colonial era that this pluralism was first confronted. The colonial experience, far from being a prologue to the rest of American history, is the beginning of a much larger story. Tom Paine had it right in *Common Sense* (1776) when he wrote that Americans were not English but an amalgam of many stocks; of course, Paine did not include African Americans and Native Americans, but the essence of his claim—that America was a new society made up of diverse elements—is true.

Beeman's use of pluralism is different than Butler's or Taylor's. Beeman uses pluralism not just to unite his narrative but also as a way to challenge our ability to tell a common story about politics during the colonial era. He emphasizes difference and downplays the political problems that the colonies shared, including religious diversity, relations with Native Americans, trade, and the meaning of self-government in an imperial and then national context. There is a tension between Beeman's commitment to diversity and his effort to find a thread to tie his stories together. In spite of their diverse political cultures, Beeman argues that the colonies "were moving, slowly and unevenly, in the same direction," towards the egalitarian political culture that was first found in the backcountry and the cities (p. 2). Like the rest of the profession, Beeman is torn between his desire to challenge older narratives and his own wish to have a narrative that can serve our (post?)modern times.

Colonial America was a diverse place. And each voice is valuable. Historians must be sensitive to this fact. We know now that any narrative privileges certain perspectives. There are thus many narratives that can be told about the eighteenth century. But there must be a theme to unite any story. Beeman convincingly argues that historians must look beyond political ideas and ideologies to actual practices. In doing so, Beeman provides a useful and

necessary caution against easy generalizations about the thirteen colonies, but we still need to construct a new synthesis to help us talk about colonial politics.

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1. For a discussion of some of this work, see Beeman's essay "The New Social History and the Search for 'Community' in Colonial America," *American Quarterly* 29 (Autumn 1977), 422–43.

2. John M. Murrin, "The Great Inversion, or Court versus Country: A Comparison of the Revolution Settlements in England (1688–1721) and America (1776–1816)," in *Three British Revolutions: 1641, 1689, 1776,* ed. J. G. A. Pocock (1980), 368–453.